

Through the Fire (Part 1)

Daniel 3

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I think you understand that the governments of our world are increasingly antagonistic to the faith that we hold dear. That's true across the world, but perhaps nowhere more so at this point than in China. Persecution of our brothers and sisters in China has been escalating since 2012. One news outlet reports this: "Experts and activists say the Chinese government is now waging the most severe suppression of Christianity in the country since religious freedoms were granted by the Chinese constitution in 1982." The Chinese government is destroying crosses, burning Bibles, closing churches, and forcing Christian believers to sign papers renouncing their faith in a crackdown on religious congregations. Activists reported filmed footage of what appeared to be piles of burning Bibles, as well as forms declaring that the signatories had rejected their faith. The authorities allegedly forced the believers to sign the forms or risk being expelled from school or losing welfare benefits. This is an increasing reality in our world. But the scripture tells us in Daniel in specific that we shouldn't be surprised by this, nor should we imagine for a moment that it is outside of the great control of our God. Scripture is clear that as God's people, we can expect to face hardship, ridicule, and persecution from state authorities because of our faith. It encourages us in the face of that to remain faithful and to trust God and to follow the example of countless believers before us. One such powerful example that we can follow is that of three Hebrew children, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in Daniel 3. That's where I want us to turn tonight, Daniel 3.

Daniel continues to drive home the overarching theme of his book, and that is that God is sovereign over human history, over its kings and its kingdoms; but the specific message of chapter 3 is that God is also sovereign over all state-sponsored persecution of His people. This account from the lives of Daniel's three Hebrew friends in Babylon really provides us with four biblical perspectives about persecution, the persecution that comes specifically against God's people from the governments of this world. We have begun to see, even in our own country, just hints of that persecution. But our brothers and sisters across the world see it clearly, dramatically, day-in and day-out. I want us to look, then, at these biblical perspectives about state-sponsored persecution. Daniel begins in chapter 3 by unfolding for us the relentless reality of government persecution. This is in the first fifteen verses of this wonderful chapter. Now, Daniel doesn't tell us exactly when this event occurred; what we know for sure is that it happened after chapter 2, because at the end of chapter 2, these three men get their positions of authority, and in chapter 3 they're already occupying those positions. We also know that it occurred before the events of chapter 4, because at the end of that chapter, Nebuchadnezzar becomes a true believer in Israel's God, and clearly that is not true in this chapter. We can't be certain, but it seems likely that chapter 3 and its events follow fairly closely the events of chapter 2. Undoubtedly, Nebuchadnezzar got the idea of building this statue from the image in his dream in chapter 2, and consolidating his authority and creating a test of the loyalty of his citizens seems to best fit a time

frame near the beginning of his reign. So, that's when these events likely transpired, shortly after what we've studied in chapter 2.

Why was Daniel not in this event recorded in chapter 3? There's no mention of him. Obviously, I think if he'd been there, he would have been mentioned, he would have refused to bow. I think the explanation for that comes at the end of chapter 2. You'll notice verse 49 says, "...Daniel made request of the king, and he appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego over the administration of the province of Babylon, while Daniel was at the king's court." The events that unfold here did not occur in the city of Babylon itself; it appears that Daniel was still there governing and overseeing the affairs of the nation while these events unfolded some sixteen miles away, as we'll see.

So, let's begin then. Daniel 3:1. "Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold..." The Aramaic word for image here implies that this statue was in the form of a human, just as the dream had been in chapter 2. He'd gotten the idea there. Such huge statues were not uncommon in ancient times. The Egyptian pharaoh built the great Sphinx, which was 240 feet long by 66 feet high and was constructed 2,000 years before Nebuchadnezzar's image. Rameses II and other pharaohs built large statues in their own image and placed them across Egypt. At the time of Daniel, the Greeks built the statue of Zeus at Olympia, which stood 40 feet high. And 200 years after Daniel, the Greeks built the great Colossus of Rhodes, which stood 105 feet high, straddling the harbor. The image that Nebuchadnezzar built was equally impressive. Notice verse 1 says: "[He] made an image of gold, the height of which was sixty cubits and its width six cubits..." That's 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. Now, if you're into ratios and dimensions, you can see that immediately that makes for a pretty awkward statue—the proportions are all wrong. But the 90 feet probably included the tall base on which the image of a man actually stood, and that would have meant the proportions of the image would have been more accurate. But don't miss the point: 90 feet tall, 30 yards high. It was meant to do one thing, and that was to overwhelm, to impress, to intimidate. Now, verse 1 says the image was made of gold. That doesn't mean it was made of solid gold. The Old Testament uses similar language to describe the bronze altar at the temple, as well as the golden altar of incense we've been studying on Sunday morning; both of them were made of wood and then covered with hammered sheets of gold. And that's the idea here. This 90-foot statue was probably made of brick and then covered with sheets of gold, and it would have been dazzling, overwhelming, overpowering in the blaze of the sunlight as it stood there on the plains outside of Babylon.

Now, remember in the dream that he had in chapter 2, the image was in the shape of a man, and then it was composed of a series of different metals, you remember, and each of those metals represented a succession of kingdoms. Daniel explained to Nebuchadnezzar that he and the Babylonian Empire, they were the head of gold, and then came the Medes and the Persians, and so forth down through the image of a man and the different metals. Think about this: if

Nebuchadnezzar had intended simply to recreate the image in his dream, then the image he built would have consisted of different metals, and only the head would have been gold. Sitting next to the image, if he was trying to reproduce what he saw in his dream, there would have been a massive stone representing the kingdom of God that would eventually destroy all human empires and crush them to powder, and the wind would blow them away. That was the image he saw. Nebuchadnezzar intentionally did neither of those things; instead, he made the entire image out of gold—and probably an image of himself. This was no accident. Go back to 2:39. You remember these words that Daniel shared in his interpretation of the dream to Nebuchadnezzar? "After you there will arise another kingdom..." Those words deeply troubled Nebuchadnezzar: "After me? After me?" Sinclair Ferguson writes, "Nebuchadnezzar's 'little kingdom' would have its day, but it would perish and the glory he had created would be destroyed." This week I saw a picture—I should have brought it to show you—of the ruins of ancient Babylon. It's a flat plain with a few bricks stacked on top of one another. That's the story of Babylon. But when he heard that, Nebuchadnezzar resented that; he resented the reality that everything he had made would be destroyed, and after him there would come another kingdom, and so he constructed his image entirely of gold to make a statement: the Babylonian kingdom that he had built would not fall; it would endure. There would be no other kingdoms to follow it. The image that he commissioned actually symbolized his defiance against the God of heaven. No kingdom would destroy his. It was defiance of the plans of Israel's God, as it had been relayed to him in his dream.

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Now, this is important to understand, because when you read Daniel, you can rightly conclude at points before it actually happens that Nebuchadnezzar has been converted. In fact, go back to 2:47. There the king says to Daniel "Surely your God is a God of gods and a Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries..." He makes such statements, and you might be convinced for a moment that he has been truly converted. But again, listen to Sinclair Ferguson: "In fact, he had experienced only a superficial and temporary setback to his self-glorification. His sinful heart had been shaken, not renewed. The truth was that instead of having a new heart, he had the same old heart, now a little more hardened..." And then Ferguson ends with these words: "Sometimes the worst and most cynical persecutors of God's people are those who themselves have had some kind of religious experience in earlier life." That's exactly right. Several years ago, now, I read a book called *Apostates*. That book documents that the great modern philosophers of Western civilization, those who have most viciously attacked the Christian faith we hold dear, were in fact all apostates; that is, they once belonged to the Christian church, they professed faith in Christ, but eventually abandoned Him. And their lack of genuine faith turned into genuine hatred of all things Christian. It's important to remember that. It's important to remember that all that glitters isn't gold. A person who talks about Christianity, who talks about the Christian faith, may in fact not be in Christ. And in this case, Nebuchadnezzar—he talked pretty well at the end of chapter 2, but that's not where his heart really was. Let me just say at a personal level this is a good reminder that you can have a religious experience and not be a true convert and follower of Jesus Christ.

Verse 1 continues: he built this image of gold, and "he set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon." Now, we can't be absolutely certain where this was, but the French archaeologist Oper believed that he actually found the site: it's about 16 miles south of Babylon in a place called Talool Dura, which means the Tales of Dura. There on that site, he actually found a brick structure about 45 feet square and about 20 feet high, and he believed that he had in fact found the base of Nebuchadnezzar's statue. What's interesting about that site is it puts it far enough away from Babylon not to be seen until the grand unveiling, but near enough that it made sense for him to build it there.

Verse 2 says, "Then Nebuchadnezzar the king sent word to assemble the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces..." For the dedication of this image, Nebuchadnezzar requires all the important officials to be present. He sent word through his messengers, through the normal channels of communication, for all the leaders of Babylon to assemble. Here Daniel mentions a number of

different classes of officials in the order of their importance. First of all, you have the satraps. That is a title from an old Persian word which means "protector of the kingdom." These were the rulers over the largest divisions of the empire. Then you have prefects. These high-ranking officials were probably those directly under and responsible to the satraps. "Governors" refers to those who oversaw smaller administrative districts or regions. Counselors were probably judges at the highest level, something like our supreme court. Treasurers oversaw the nations assets and resources, its gold reserves and other precious metals. Judges—these are probably judges at the lower level, those who actually administrated justice—heard cases throughout the realm. Magistrates were the officials who likely oversaw those who had police-like authority. And then he adds "all the rulers of the provinces." All the less important dignitaries and officials from around the empire were included in this event. You look at this list and you quickly realize that he had required everybody who was somebody to attend. Verse 2 says he sent word to assemble all of these leaders—notice how verse 2 puts it—"to come to the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up." All of these officials were required to report to the plain of Dura for what was described to them as the dedication of an official state statue celebrating the greatness of Babylon. Now this was not uncommon; in fact, another example in ancient history would be Sargon of Assyria, who built a similar image and brought all of his officials together for its dedication. This was not an uncommon event. Verse 3 says, "Then the satraps, the prefects and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the judges, the magistrates and all the rulers of the provinces were assembled for the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up..." So, the word went out; they all gather. "...They stood," it says, "before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Now again, you have to use a little sanctified imagination, as my father-in-law used to say, when you read the Bible. You can only imagine what this event was like. What we're reading and the repetition we're reading is intended to communicate here is a huge and important state event. We've seen just a little of that with the recent funeral of our former president. This was intended to be a solemn, dignified, great state event, and everybody who was somebody was there, and all of the people who were there were dressed in their finest uniforms.

As the statue was unveiled, and they stood in front of this massive image of gold of a man, they realized in fact that it was the image of a man. It may have been one of Babylon's gods—some think it was—but I think more likely it was Nebuchadnezzar himself. Remember, Daniel had said to Nebuchadnezzar, "You are the head of gold, you symbolize Babylon"—that's what he was saying to him. And I think Nebuchadnezzar took that to heart. Now, I am sure that not everyone who gathered on the plain of Dura, when they realized what was really going on, was excited about this event. Clearly, this was more than a celebration of Babylon. They immediately saw it, I'm sure when the statue was unveiled for what it was, it was a test of their loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar and to his government. At the same time, verse 28 makes it clear that it involved the worship of Babylon's gods as well. So, get the scene: all the important leaders of the empire, probably hundreds, perhaps in the thousands of government officials, have gathered in

one place, and there they are, all formally regaled, standing in front of this massive statue of probably brick covered with hammered sheets of gold. The sun dazzling off of it in the clear desert sky. Undoubtedly, as they stood there, the air was charged; they're all wondering, "So what's going to happen next?"

Verse 4: "Then the herald loudly proclaimed: 'To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and men of every language...' It was Babylonian tradition to use a public herald with a loud voice—in a different time I might have had a different occupation; you never know. The three groups that are mentioned here in verse 4 are roughly equivalent to what we would say: "all ethnicities, all nations, and all languages." Now, why would he say that? Because Babylon was an international empire, and Babylonian policy was to use the captured peoples to administrate those places that had been captured. That's why, for example, these Jewish young men were trained in the Babylonian court: they were to oversee, in part, their own people. And so, this was the practice. You had people literally from all of the parts of the Babylonian Empire and many different languages, many different ethnicities, and here was the king's command to them.

Verse 5: "...that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music..." You read history, and you realize Babylonians loved music. There are even a couple of references in the scripture itself to the fact that they loved music. And here we have a description of the instruments that were probably in Nebuchadnezzar's official orchestra. Look at them briefly. "Horn." That could be an animal's horn, but here it's likely a musical wind instrument, probably made of silver in the same family as our trumpet. "Flute" comes from an Aramaic word which means "to whistle." This was a woodwind instrument of some kind. The lyre was a stringed instrument with between three and twelve strings. The lyre was usually only used by the wealthy, and it was often made of precious metal or of ivory. A trigon was a small, triangular instrument with four strings usually used for playing high notes. The psaltery was also a stringed instrument in a triangular shape, but its strings usually passed under the sounding board rather than over it. It had ten strings stretched across a resonating drum and was plucked with a pick, the sort of ancient equivalent of a guitar. And then "bagpipe." Now, when you see that word in your text, you might think, "There's an anachronism; surely we're not talking 'bagpipe.'" Well, the fact is this Aramaic word comes from the Greek word "symphonia." It was a wind instrument composed of a goatskin bag with two reed pipes. One pipe was used for filling the bag with air, blown from the mouth, and the other pipe came out of the bag and was pierced with holes for fingering various notes, so very much like the bagpipe as we know it. And then Daniel adds, "all kinds of music." That means the instruments that he mentions here are only a partial list of the instruments in the orchestra. Those of you who think, "Yeah, there we go; see no good orchestra should have any percussion in it," sorry; they were likely there. "All kinds of music." Undoubtedly, the members of the orchestra were also dressed in their finest colorful outfits and were seated on a raised, lavishly decorated platform.

Verse 5 says, "...at the moment you hear the sound of the [royal orchestra], you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up." These Aramaic words describe the worship of a deity. Now, it's possible that Nebuchadnezzar had in mind their actually worshipping him; that doesn't seem to fit Babylonian culture at the time of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. More likely, here's what he was demanding: Nebuchadnezzar was demanding three things. He was demanding that they affirm their loyalty to him as their rightful king, hence it's an image made in his image. Two, that they affirm their loyalty to the Babylonian Empire. And three, that they worship the gods of Babylon who made him their king and who had given their empire such a great success. It was, if you will, the worship of the Spirit of Babylon. Refusing to do this came with a horrible penalty. Verse 6: "But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire." Now, think about it for a moment. The fact that this threat would be announced at the dedication of this image implies that Nebuchadnezzar expected some possible resistance from some of the captured foreigners that he had conscripted into his service. Near the statue, then, there was a furnace already ablaze, fire and smoke billowing out of the top of this furnace. This makes sense, when you think about it. I mean, think about what he's built there on the plains of Dura: to manufacture the bricks necessary to build the superstructure of this statue and to melt the metal for the gold plating would have required a massive kiln. It's interesting; if you do a little research, you'll find that Mesopotamian smelting furnaces like this one were often in the shape of an old-fashioned glass milk bottle, if you can picture that. A large opening at the top was where they dropped the ore that was to be smelted into the furnace, and also that large hole at the top is where, of course, the fire and smoke rose. Usually, there was a ramp or a platform that provided access to the top of the furnace. A smaller opening at the bottom was for the wood or the charcoal to fuel the fire. These were incredibly efficient. In fact, such kilns archaeologists estimate could generate temperatures as high as 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. Anyone who dared to defy Nebuchadnezzar's order would be thrown into that kiln and burned to death. And the furnace was right there next to the image, already billowing smoke and fire ominously from its top. By the way, if you think this is some novel idea for Nebuchadnezzar, it's not. This was the kind of man he was. In fact, listen to Jeremiah 29:22. "...[A] curse will be used by all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon"—so this is a curse that they'll say there in Babylon—"May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire..." This was normal practice for Nebuchadnezzar. This was no idle threat.

Now, in light of the command and the penalty, it's not surprising that Daniel records this in verse 7: "Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up." This is the ultimate in both peer pressure and intimidation. When the orchestra began to play, hundreds of the most important, influential people in Babylon all fell down and worshiped the image of gold exactly as Nebuchadnezzar had commanded. This is groupthink at its absolute worst. Everyone

did this except for three. It's clear Daniel wasn't there, for whatever reason. It's equally clear the other captives who'd been taken from Judah all fell down and worshiped the image. But there were three who refused to bow. There were three who stood alone. Can you even imagine—now that I've tried to paint a little picture of this event—can you even imagine the pressure that was on these three young men? At this point, if we're right about the timing, they would have been twenty or just a little younger. They're in a foreign land hundreds of miles from their home. And they stood. They may have expected at least some of their fellow Jews to join them in this revolt, but none did. Think of the reasons they could have come up with in their own mind to justify falling down in front of this statue. I mean, they could have thought about their own safety: "Well surely, God doesn't expect us to risk our lives to do this." They could have thought about their future: "Look at how God has positioned us for the future; we don't want to wreck all of that. We're in places of leadership. We don't in any way want to somehow put that at risk." They could have thought even religiously; they could have said, "Listen, we're here to expose these people to the knowledge of God; we can't do that if we're dead!" A lot of things, a lot of reasons they could have come up with to excuse themselves for going along. But they made no excuses, and they remained loyal to God, not because—and this is very important to understand: they're not the heroes of the story—it's not because they were such noble men of courage that they stood when everyone else bowed. It's because our God is always faithful to sustain His people when He puts them into such circumstances. That's a great encouragement to me. Have you ever wondered to yourself, "What would I do? What would I do, if I were forced into this kind of situation where my life was at stake?" Listen, if you're in Christ, you can rely on a faithful God who will, if He puts you in that circumstance, give you the faith and courage to do what's right. It won't be because of you. It won't be because of me. It'll be because of who God is.

Verse 8: "For this reason at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and brought charges against the Jews." Apparently, the crowd was large enough that it wasn't immediately obvious to the king that some had stood. But there were informers—there always are: "...certain Chaldeans..." Now, that word "Chaldeans" is used in two ways in Daniel. It could mean these are ethnic Chaldeans who were motivated by racial prejudice against the Jews—in other words, they're Babylonians—or it could be used, more specifically, of the wise men—they're also called Chaldeans—the group of the king's advisors to which Daniel belonged. If so, they were motivated by both racial prejudice and jealousy. But whoever they were, this group came forward, and, notice it says, "brought charges against the Jews." Here's a case where the original language has a powerful word picture. Because we read they "brought charges"—here's how the Aramaic reads: they "ate the pieces of the Jews." In other words, driven by their hatred and their hostility toward these Jews, they literally chewed them up with their words before the king. They began by reminding the king of his decree and the death penalty for refusing to obey. Notice verse 9:

They responded and said to Nebuchadnezzar the king: "O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree that every man who hears the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe and all kinds of music, is to fall down and worship the golden image. But whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire."

So, they remind the king of both the command and the penalty, and then in verse 12, they make their specific accusation against these three men. Notice verse 12: "There are certain Jews..." You can just hear the animosity in their language. Again, note that they emphasize these men were Jews. Their hatred was, in part, driven by ethnic prejudice. Why is it that so many people in our world are opposed to the Jewish people? Why is antisemitism such a huge issue? There's only one explanation: it's because it's ultimately satanic. Whitcomb writes this: "Satan knew that through this divinely chosen people would come the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of all mankind," and, therefore, he focuses his hatred, and still does. By the way, the same is true of the world's hatred of us, as Christians. Have you ever wondered? I mean, you don't see the same kind of vitriol in the comment sections online against other faiths. There are not those comments against the Buddhists. Only against us. Why? It goes back to the same reason: Satan's hatred of God and His Christ and, therefore, of His people. Verse 12 says, "There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the administration of the province of Babylon..." Notice in their animosity they even imply that the king has made an error in judgment. But notice in what they say it's clear their hatred is equally fueled by their jealousy of the success of these Jewish captives. "Look at the position they're in that you gave them, king!" Then they identify the offenders: "...namely Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego." Now think about this: clearly, they knew these men personally, and yet they resented them and hated them. Now, having said all of that, they come to three very specific accusations in verse 12: "These men, O king," number one, "have disregarded you." That is, "They have no respect for you and your commands," which was absolutely not true. Two: "...they do not serve your gods," which was true, "or," three, "worship the golden image which you have set up," and that was also certainly true. Why? Why did these men take this position? For these three Jewish teenagers, what Nebuchadnezzar required of them was a blatant violation of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me," and it simply could not be done.

Verse 13: Then Nebuchadnezzar in rage and anger gave orders to bring Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego; then these men were brought before the king." Together, the words "rage" and "anger" describe a man who is completely overcome by rage. He orders his soldiers to bring these men to him, and of course his soldiers immediately complied, and they're brought into his presence. Verse 14: "Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, that you,'" one, "'do not serve my gods...?'" Now notice, here, he leaves out the first accusation, because I think even Nebuchadnezzar knew they hadn't disrespected him. You go back to chapter 2 and you see that. Instead, he says, "'Is it true...that,'" one, "'you do not serve

my gods or," two, "worship the golden image that I have set up?" Nebuchadnezzar is incredulous. He finds it almost impossible to believe that these three young Jewish men, whom he took as captives from their country, brought them back to Babylon, educated them for three years, gave them the finest that Babylon had to offer, and has now promoted them to positions of prominence in the province of Babylon, have chosen to defy him in such a public and dramatic way.

Now, we read this chapter and we go, "Well, duh, I mean why didn't Nebuchadnezzar get this?" But think about this for a moment. Nebuchadnezzar didn't intend this new policy to be persecution. No—what he's asked people to do here seemed to him to be a completely reasonable expectation of his citizens. He wasn't asking them to renounce their own god; he was merely asking them to acknowledge the greatness of the gods of Babylon. As a polytheist, this wasn't a problem. Now, I say this because it's very important to understand this is still how it works today. Often, the persecution of God's people by government doesn't initially start with the intention to persecute. Government officials and bureaucrats caught up in the groupthink of their age pass laws that they think make perfectly legitimate, reasonable demands of their citizens. You say, "Does this still happen today?" Well, think about this: can you imagine a lawmaker in the U.S. saying, "How could any reasonable person think that two homosexuals shouldn't be able to marry? This is not an unreasonable expectation of our citizens." Or, "What caring person would refuse to allow people to self-define their genders?" And on, and on, and on it goes. Insert the newest groupthink. You see, to the people passing these laws, it doesn't begin as persecution; it begins as, "This seems perfectly legitimate and reasonable to us; how could any reasonable person reject these things?" But when we fail to go along, like these three Hebrew children did, because it's contrary to God's law, because it puts us in conflict with God, persecution quickly follows, because we are being "unreasonable," "bigoted," fill in the blank. And, when that begins to escalate, there are always bureaucrats hidden in the hierarchy of government who hate God and who hate God's people, and they actively, then, begin to wage war against God's people. There are always certain Chaldeans, driven by all kinds of motives, eager to chew up God's people. So, that's how it happened, and that's how it still happens.

Now, for some unexplainable reason, Nebuchadnezzar was willing to grant these young men another chance. We're not told why. Maybe he really liked them. Maybe he didn't want to waste the huge investment that he'd already made in them, all of their education and all of the financial resources that had been invested. Or maybe he thought that in this public environment, it would be far better if it looked like everyone went along. So, he just needs to persuade them to get in step. Regardless, he offers them another opportunity. Verse 15: "Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well," it's going to be okay. "But if you do not worship, you will immediately"—the Aramaic says you will "in the moment"—"be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire..." And then don't miss what

Nebuchadnezzar adds next; this is key: "...and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" How often have the governments of this world said that to God's people?

Nebuchadnezzar, you remember, had acknowledged back in chapter 2 that Yahweh was powerful after he had revealed the dream and its interpretation, but now he says, "He may be powerful, but you guys don't think for a moment that your god can protect you from me, or from the gods of Babylon, or from this blazing kiln next to us, from death in that furnace." You see what Nebuchadnezzar was doing? He was directly challenging Yahweh.

Folks, this is a constant reality for the people of God. We face it only in the smallest degrees here in our country, and less in Texas than they face in some other states across our country, but the people around our world, our brothers and sisters in Christ, they find that persecution is a constant reality. And isn't that what the New Testament says? 2 Timothy 3:12. "...All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Look at Matthew 5, as Jesus begins to finish up the beatitudes and enter into the message itself, and he says this in Matthew 5:10. "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for [to them belongs the kingdom of heaven]. Blessed are you"—and notice here, persecution takes a lot of different forms; these are more the forms it takes in our lives—"Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Persecution is a constant reality, and guess what? Government is often the source of the persecution of God's people.

But where does this persecution come from? It comes from two sources. First of all, it comes from sinful men and women in government who hate God and his truth. There are so many examples of this in scripture. Take Jezebel in 1 Kings 19:2. "Jezebel," the queen of the nation, "sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of [one of the prophets of Baal who have been killed] by tomorrow about this time.'" "I'm going to kill you." Driven by her hatred, her personal hatred and vindictiveness toward Elijah. The psalmist in Psalm 119:161 says, "Princes persecute me without cause..." Jeremiah faced this. Jeremiah 38:6. At the king's order, "they took Jeremiah and cast him into the cistern...which was in the court of the guardhouse; and they let Jeremiah down with ropes. Now in the cistern there was no water but only mud, and Jeremiah sank into the mud." Or there's the New Testament. Acts 12: "Now about that time Herod the king"—this is not Herod the great; this is one of his subsequent rulers—"laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also." There are those in government who hate God and who hate everything connected to God, including His people. But that's not the ultimate source, and it's so important for us to keep this in mind. Satan is the ultimate source of all persecution. Genesis 3:15. We're told that "I will put enmity," God says to Satan,

"between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed," between the children of Satan and the children of God. Job 2:6.

The LORD said to Satan, "Behold, [Job] is in your power, only spare his life." Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

Revelation 2:10. And by the way, here Satan is energizing government to accomplish this: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer," Jesus says. "Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison..." Notice, He sort of cuts out the middle man. It's not government; "the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." Christian, remember persecution is normal. Don't be surprised when we face it here in our own country. Daniel includes this story to remind us that, when faced with the choice, we must act as they acted, we must obey God rather than men, we must obey the first commandment and have no other gods before him, be loyal to the true God, even if it kills us—and it might. But the story doesn't end there. It doesn't end with persecution. We've seen the relentless reality of government persecution. Lord willing, the next time we study this, we'll look at the believer's response to government persecution, how we ought to respond, God's consistent protection from government persecution, and we'll even look at God's ultimate purpose for allowing government persecution. But Christian, don't be surprised. God is still on his throne. That's the point of Daniel 3. When it comes, God is no less in control than he was before. Let's pray together.

Father, make us true to You. Lord, we acknowledge that we all fear how we would respond faced with intense persecution. Lord, we fail at times even now, when we're just insulted and ridiculed, snubbed, but Father, thank You that You are faithful. You're faithful when persecution is at this level, and You will be faithful if persecution should rise to the level it did with these three young men. Lord, we depend not on ourselves and our own faithfulness, but on You and Your faithfulness to us. Thank You that our Lord Himself said that He would not allow us to be put in a place where our faith would fail. We find great comfort and confidence in that. But Lord, we love You, and we want, like they were, to be loyal to You, whatever the cost. Help us to rejoice and remember that this is the way the godly have always been treated. It's the way our Lord was treated. Help us to follow in His steps with joy, knowing that this life will deliver us into Your eternal presence, where there will be complete and total vindication. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.